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From Indio to Campesino and back: Revolution, agrarian reform and indigenism in Mexico

Dedication

Besides his numerous other interests Erwin Frank made a thorough study of the discrimination that Latin America's indigenous population suffered at the hands of the dominant groups as well as the ethnic movements that emerged, partly as a result of their having been marginalized. He demonstrated that it is possible to combine political commitment to the needs of the indigenous population with the necessary scientific distance towards one's object of study. An outstanding example of this is Frank's chapter on the history of Ecuador's indigenous movement (Frank 1992). In it he analysed intensively the changes in the country's agrarian structure and government policies identifying them as important factors contributing to the emergence of the indigenous movement. In the following article we make use of his argument, focussing on the history of Mexico.

Preamble

Numerous government aid programmes are aimed at the needs of indigenous communities in rural areas.[1] Normally, such programmes rely on census data concerning the number of speakers of indigenous languages, a community's degree of marginality, and on statistics about low educational levels to determine who will benefit. One such programme concerns the cultural missions (*misiones culturales*) whose promoters reside for several months in the villages implementing community development projects. Several promoters approached the local authorities of Xlapak, a village inhabited predominantly by speakers of Yucatec Maya in the Yucatan peninsula, in the early 1990s. Unexpectedly, the promoters' offer to establish a Brigade for Indigenous Development and Advancement (*Brigada de Desarrollo y Mejoramiento Indígena*) met with resistance. People did not object to community development as such but urged

1 Such programmes are coordinated by the National Commission for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples (CDI – *Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas*), which has succeeded the INI – *Instituto Nacional Indigenista*, the ministry of education or other institutions at the state or federal levels.

the development workers to strike one term from the project's name.[2] The inhabitants of Xlapak called themselves *ejidatarios* (member of an *ejido*, see below), *campesinos* (peasants) or *mayeros* (speakers of Yucatec Maya) but rejected *indígena* (indigenous) as a label for their persons or their village. This anecdote shows that the widespread practice of regarding all those who speak an indigenous language as "indigenous" may be highly misleading when presuming the existence of an ethnic consciousness among speakers. Categorisation by outsiders and the way in which inhabitants refer to themselves need not coincide.

1. Introduction

As is widely known, the American Indians owe their name to the error of the Genoese sailor Cristobal Colón (or Columbus), who was convinced he had discovered a new sea route to East India. He had in fact stumbled on a continent hitherto unknown to Europeans in 1492. His geographical error notwithstanding, "Indian" (*indio*, *indígena)* has remained the standard term for referring to the native American to this day. These Indians were far from homogeneous. They differed greatly with respect to language, mode of living, and social organisation and showed several dissimilarities in terms of physical traits, such as skin colour or average height.[3] Thus, the colonial category imposed on the region includes vastly different populations and ignores the huge variety of languages and cultures in the Americas.

Spanish law defined Indians as a special social category (estate) to which one belonged by birth. Indians were subject to specific laws and decrees. Regarded as minors and wards of the Crown, they were forbidden to bear arms, ride horses, or dress like Spaniards. To close a legally binding contract they needed the consent of the colonial authorities. While the lands of indigenous communities were protected by the Spanish crown to a certain extent, Indians had to pay tribute and provide labour services to the Spanish.[4] The majority of the indigenous population remains among the poorest and most marginalized sectors of Latin American societies. Thus, the term Indian has become a synonym for being poor, undeveloped, backward, and powerless.[5]

2 Field notes from the Chenes region, Campeche, Mexico, 19 September 1994. The name of the village has been changed.

3 For a concise overview see Schüren (2005).

4 For the role of the indigenous elites who enjoyed certain privileges see, for example, Gabbert (2004a: 11-12, 19, 23-25, 33-35).

5 In 2000, 65% of the speakers of indigenous languages lived in rural areas in Mexico, in communities of less than 2,500 inhabitants. 99.6% of the communities in which the indigenous part of the population was estimated at more than 30% were considered "marginal", that means, lacking infrastructure, evincing high levels of unemployment and illiteracy (Gobierno Federal 2002:

It represents a low social status which evoked, at least until recently, at best, pity and paternalism, or, at worst, racism and violent discrimination. Considering these connotations, it comes as no surprise that most speakers of indigenous languages did not adopt the term as a self-designation. To be classed as an Indian or called "indigenous" represented continuity with the colonial discourse. In fact, the demeanour of government officials as well as large parts of the urban population and the rural Spanish-speaking elites towards the rural poor recalled a colonial relationship.

The state plays a crucial role in the development of views of ethnicity and of inter-ethnic relations (Brass 1991: 271-274; Gabbert 2004a: xiv). We will therefore discuss some aspects of the relationship between the Mexican governments and rural communities in the twentieth century. First, we analyse the development of agrarian reform from the time of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 to the 1980s, since agrarian and indigenist policies were intimately related. Furthermore, the indigenous population is still considered mostly to be rural folk, the growing numbers of Indians living in cities notwithstanding.[6]

Rural communities are considered epitomes of the self-governing and communitarian way of life of indigenous peasants in Latin America, especially in political discourse (e.g., Díaz Polanco 1997: 20-27). Their norms for the allocation and exploitation of agrarian lands are frequently seen as "traditional". When Mexico's agrarian laws were revised in 1992, allowing the privatisation of *ejido* and community land, these changes were frequently interpreted as the destruction of "traditional" indigenous social structures (e.g., Díaz Polanco 1997: 131, 139).

In the following, two main questions will be addressed:

1. To what extent can the Revolution, agrarian reform and agrarian policies in Mexico be considered "indigenous"? What role did "indigenism" (*indigenismo*)[7] play in these processes?
2. How did government policies affect the self-concept of the rural population?

30-31). While 10.2% of the entire Mexican population above 14 years of age lacked any education, this was the case for 26.1% in the municipalities with a predominantly indigenous population. The share of those in employment who earned less than the minimum wage was more than the double in such municipalities when compared with the national average (54.2 versus 20.7%) (CDI 2009: *cuadros* 5, 7).

6 Around 60% of the Chilean Mapuche live currently in cities, three quarters of them alone in the capital Santiago (<www.gfbv.de/inhaltsDok.php?id=428>; 28.09.2009).

7 Indigenism emerged as a literary and political current in opposition to the then prevailing social Darwinist and racist notions. It aimed at the improvement of the social, economic and educational situation of the indigenous population (howsoever defined).

2. Land tenure and agrarian policies in Mexico

Land reform was doubtless one of the Mexican Revolution's main achievements.[8] Authors such as the US journalist and politician Ernest Gruening considered the preservation or the strengthening of indigenous traditions one of its central aims and concluded: "The contemporary *ejido* is little other than the *calpulli* of the Aztecs" (Gruening 1928: 166, see also Huizer 1997: 152-154). However, this interpretation is erroneous for a number of reasons.

1. Liberal reformers attacked not only the corporate landed property of the church but also the rural communities' communal land tenure, after Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821. Peasants were to be freed from the "cruel yoke of the community" (*El Siglo*, 13 August 1853, quoted in Hale 1968: 238) and their lands transformed into a commodity to pave the way for the development of a modern capitalist agriculture. Thus, not only the Catholic church, then the largest land owner in the country, but also many peasant communities lost much of their lands through alienation from it, following the liberal reform legislation of 1856; this legislation was tightened during the rule of the authoritarian president Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). Around 40% of agrarian lands in central and southern Mexico were held by peasant communities at the time of independence. This percentage dropped to no more than five per cent at the end of the Díaz administration in 1911 (Katz 1991: 94).
   The privatisation of church, communal, and national lands did not lead to the formation of a broad class of prosperous farmers, as the Liberals had expected, but resulted in a hitherto unknown concentration of land ownership in a few hands, due to the amplification of infrastructure and the expansion of commercial agriculture. "Freed" from their lands, most peasants became farm hands (*peones*), frequently forced to work on the expanding haciendas by debt peonage. While farm labourers with a permanent contract (*peones acasillados*) enjoyed at least some social security, the situation became more and more critical for the majority of land poor or landless peasants who were only hired on a seasonal basis. It was the impoverished inhabitants of peasant communities, especially in the state of Morelos, pressed by their worsening economic situation and united by their claim for land, who joined the revolutionary forces against the Díaz government in 1910.[9]

8 Schüren (1997) provides a concise discussion of agrarian reform and the changes in the agrarian laws of 1992.

9 Mexico's agrarian structure was highly differentiated. Therefore, the social composition and political demands of the revolutionary forces differed among regions. See Tobler (1984: 78-86, 137-149).

The struggle for land and the peasant participation in the revolution did not rely on specific indigenous or indigenist demands. The characterisation of Emiliano Zapata's revolutionary movement in southern Mexico as an "Indian uprising", for example, is mainly an ex post projection. Contemporary enemies defamed the Zapatistas as "wild hordes". Their leader was compared to Attila, the destructive king of the ancient Huns, and not to any figure of the indigenous past (Womack 1968: 100). The revolutionaries' discourse was dominated by ideas of social reform, socialism, and Marxist class rhetoric, referring, for example, to the "rural proletariat" and considering the revolution a peasant uprising. Apart from this, local notions moulded the land claims of particular villages. The term Indian was employed only by urban dwellers to refer to the rural folk but was not used as a self-designation by rural inhabitants (Womack 1968: 70-71). Alan Knight concludes:

> Hence, the Revolution that began in 1910 could be fought and was fought on the basis of considerable Indian participation ..., but in the absence of any self-consciously Indian project. [...] Zapatismo ... was linked to the 'Indian' cause first by outraged planters, who similarly shrilled the dangers of caste war, and later by indigenista reformers like Gamio (and even Vasconcelos), who chose to see Zapatismo, in retrospect, as the awakening of the Indian people of Morelos (Knight 1990: 76-77).

2. Diverse customary forms of communal organisation and cultural practices, considered "indigenous" by outside observers, can still be found today especially in the communities that have existed since colonial or pre-colonial times: the system of hierarchically ordered offices (*cargos*) that began to form in the colonial period is a well-known example (see, e.g., Chance & Taylor 1985). Practitioners did not consider these local customs to be part of an overarching indigenous culture nor did they hold an encompassing ethnic consciousness. The home community remained the most important level for identification. For instance, indigenous peasants in highland Chiapas considered themselves mainly as members of the village of San Pedro Chenalhó or San Juan Chamula and not as belonging to theTzotzil ethnie or as "Indian" (Favre 1984: 133-145). Anthropologist Philip Dennis reported in the 1980s that members of indigenous communities described the inhabitants of neighbouring villages belonging to the same language group in Oaxaca as follows: "[T]hey are another race", "they're almost animals", "they're a people without reason".[10]

10 Dennis (1987: 33); see Favre (1984: 145) for similar expressions in Chiapas.

3. The introduction of the *ejido* and the restitution of community lands by the agrarian reform that followed the Mexican Revolution referred back only partially to precolonial forms of land tenure. It was largely based on colonial regulations with roots in medieval Spain. The term *ejido*, for example, is related to the Latin word *exitus* (exit) and referred in Castile to a special tract of land immediately outside the town gates which was held in common.[11] Indian communities obtained titles to agrarian land, including *ejidos*, from the Spanish colonial administration after the conquest had been completed. At first, *ejido* referred – as in Castile – to a relatively small tract of uncultivated land outside the towns that community members were allowed to use without pay. In late colonial times the meaning of *ejido* changed to refer to the entirety of the communal lands, including pastures and wood, individual cultivation plots and even the *propios*, areas that were collectively used or rented out to individuals by the indigenous community administration to cover its expenses. It was illegal to sell these communal lands until the Liberal reforms of the mid-nineteenth century (Ibarra Mendevil 1989: 79-88; Simpson 1937: 1-14; Whetten 1948: 75-85). In fact, however, illegal sales or the appropriation of community lands occurred in the colonial and post-colonial periods, due mostly to the expansion of large estates (Powell 1972).
4. The modern *ejido*, introduced after the Mexican Revolution, is a system of collective land tenure. While the land remains under the domain of the nation, members hold permanent usufructuary rights. Ejidal communities are frequently composed of a variegated mix of beneficiaries. Dating from the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), land reform was held to be aimed at benefitting all those with insufficient agrarian land or lacking it entirely. Cárdenas included farm labourers in addition to free peasants into the programme. Many *ejidos* were newly created so as to unite by common rights not only the members of a village and former labourers of a nearby hacienda but also recently arrived settlers from other parts of the country. Access to the programme in no way presupposed evidence of indigenous roots (Schüren 2002: 172-176).

11 The *ejidos* were places where the public garbage dump and pens for roaming livestock were located. In addition, people butchered livestock and threshed grain there. The growing of crops, however, was not permitted (Whetten 1948: 80).

5. Indigenist discourse began to gain importance in the 1920s. Some contemporary politicians considered the collective usufructuary or property rights distributed to the *ejidos* or restituted to the communities as appropriate for the character of the Indians who supposedly clung to communal forms of organisation.[12] Thus, Governor Felipe Carillo Puerto of the state of Yucatan pursued decidedly indigenist policies in the early 1920s stressing in his speeches and writings the need to strengthen the Mayas' ethnic consciousness and communal traditions. He introduced bilingual education and aimed at the recognition of Yucatec Maya as an official language in the state (Gabbert 2004a: 96-99, 104-105). However, his programme and policies were exceptional in the nation at that time.

   As a matter of fact, most communal or ejidal land has been worked individually and not collectively (see, e.g., Romano Delgado 2002: 240-242). Therefore, *ejidos* and communities have become complex social, economic and legal institutions regulating, among other things, access to agrarian lands and with specific organisation of its members. The term *ejido* is generally used to refer to all inhabitants of a village. Nevertheless, in actual fact, only some of them enjoy formal land rights. Although the distribution of rights among heirs was forbidden, parcels have been frequently given to several children (see, e.g., Edel 1966: 173-174), leading to the increasing fragmentation of agrarian lands (*minifundismo*). In addition, land invasions have been frequent due to the scarcity of agricultural land for a growing population. In principle, all *ejido* members should have access to the same amount of land of comparable quality. Nevertheless, land has been often appropriated by ejidal (or communal) authorities or influential families. In addition, prosperous members enlarged their holdings by acquiring private land beyond the *ejido* or community territory (see, e.g., Cancian 1992: 121-122).

   President Salinas de Gortari declared the end of land distribution in 1992 and announced the revision of the Mexican Constitution's article 27 (regulating the legal forms of land holding) and profound changes in the agrarian legislation. *Ejidos* and communities gained the right to change the status of their lands to individual private property, rent it out or even to sell it to outsiders under certain conditions. These changes contributed to a further increase in the economic and social differentiation in the *ejidos* and communities.

12 The assumption of an Indian communal tradition was not confined to early revolutionary leaders, such as the Socialist Felipe Carrillo Puerto, but shared by leading intellectuals who played a key role in the definition of the government's development policies from the 1950s (for example, Aguirre Beltrán & Pozas Arciniega 1954: 22-24).

As this chapter has shown, the preservation or strengthening of supposedly indigenous traditions played little role in land reform. Revolutionaries fought for their local or class interests as peasants (*campesinos*) and did not have a special indigenous project on their agenda. The *ejido* was based mostly on colonial and post-colonial models of organisation and land use was generally individual. The pronounced social and economic differentiation within *ejidos* scarcely fits the image of the supposedly homogeneous, egalitarian and traditional indigenous communities as sketched by indigenism (see below).

3. Indigenism and the rural folk

Contemporary Indians and their traditions were, during the nineteenth century, considered to be major obstacles to the nation's progress and a cause of the country's backwardness by most politicians and intellectuals. However, the Mexican Revolution of 1910 led to a profound change in nationalist ideology. The indigenous heritage and rural life in general were re-evaluated. Revolutionary ideology rejected the open racism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, stressing a modernising nationalism which aimed at the integration of the hitherto excluded indigenous communities. The future Mexican nation should emerge from the blending of the indigenous and Spanish-American heritage.

Government policies in Mexico were decisively shaped by the theoretical debates in the social sciences. Anthropology became especially influential from the 1920s, contributing much to the formulation of indigenism, on which most government programmes to assist the indigenous population are based. Until the 1970s, most government policies assumed that only education, modernisation and the assimilation into the mestizo national society could overcome the supposed backwardness of the indigenous rural communities. Consequently, the activities of Mexico's Nationalist Indigenous Institute (INI) aimed at the integration of the Indians through modernisation, i.e., instruction in Western scientific, medical and technical skills (for example, Caso 1950 or Aguirre Beltrán 1967). Indigenists treated the Indians generally as the objects of their work, excluding them from the programmes' planning and realisation. They thus were reproducing the stereotypes about the indigenous population.[13]

This is also true of the policies of Lázaro Cárdenas, who was the first president to draft a specific Indian policy in the 1930s. He founded the federal Department of

13 For Latin America in general see Barre (1983: 29-100); for Ecuador Frank (1992: 51-53); for Mexico Gabbert (1992: 35-43; 2007a: 111-117).

Indian Affairs (*Departamento de Asuntos Indígenas* – DAI), precursor of the INI, in 1936 and encouraged the structuring of separate organisations for Indians (Sarmiento Silva 1985: 199-200).

Cárdenas wanted to "make the [modern] world culture accessible to the indio, to bring his potential and skills to their full deployment and to improve his living conditions" respecting his "personality, his consciousness and character".[14] However, during his term of office, and even more so under his successors, the intention was not to foster a consciousness of ethnic separateness among the Indians but to integrate them into the national people. Thus, Cárdenas declared: "[O]ur problem does not consist in preserving the Indian (*indio*) as an Indian or to Indianise Mexico but to Mexicanise the Indian" (quoted in Medin 1975: 176, translation ours). He considered the Indians' position as an oppressed class their prime characteristic, crediting skin colour, handicrafts, or special forms of social organisation with only secondary importance.[15] This position regarding class was shared with the mestizos (Aguirre Beltrán 1971: 1008). Cárdenas essentially defined the Indian in negative terms, stressing what he lacked instead of what he was:

> The greatest dearth in education and economy exists in the remote villages. ... A huge concentration of the indigenous population cannot speak our language and destroys the forests as a result of their insufficient knowledge of cultivation systems. There are many among them who are dominated by the vice of alcohol and narcoticised by fanaticism.[16]

This negative image, shared by large sectors of Mexican society, has determined the status of people considered Indians up to the present.

Cárdenas did not intend to establish an autonomous political or societal project of the Indians. The foundation of a specialised department for indigenous issues and the encouragement of indigenous organisations were merely means to mobilise the indigenous population in favour of the Cardenist reform agenda and to foster their long-term integration into national society (see also Aguirre Beltrán 1971: 1015-1017). A profound organisation and mobilisation of the indigenous rural population did not come about during Cárdenas's presidency and such was not even aimed at by his successors. The existing organisations remained small in membership and distant from rural grassroots. Their activists and main social bases were mostly recruited from an emerging stratum of students, teachers, government employees, and professionals of

14 *Discurso en el Primer Congreso Indigenista Interamericano*, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, 14 April 1940, Cárdenas (1972: 173, our translation).

15 See, for example, *Discurso en el Primer Congreso Indigenista Interamericano*, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, 14 April 1940, Cárdenas 1972: 172, our translation.

16 *Discurso en Oaxaca*, Oaxaca, 15 April 1934, Cárdenas (1972: 167-168, our translation).

indigenous background. Their demands focussed on educational and cultural issues. Most Indians in the villages, in contrast, became organised as peasants in the official National Peasant Confederation (*Confederación Nacional Campesina* – CNC) (Gabbert 1992: 37-39; Sarmiento Silva 1985: 199-202).

Even programmes of bilingual education, held to be progressive, did not have much success in preserving the indigenous languages since their key objective was to facilitate the acquisition of the national language Spanish. Most government programmes were in fact measures to foster directed cultural change, even if some aspects of the "indigenous culture", such as the production of handicrafts, music, dance and costumes, were to be preserved. These were considered symbolic of the Mexican nation's independence from Spain and from the feared "sister republic" in the north, the United States. They were also esteemed as enriching the national folklore, so providing an exotic attraction for the emerging tourist industry. Therefore, Cárdenas stressed the necessity:

> [...] to advocate for the economic and social integration of indigenous people, without necessarily losing their singularities, which both have so much contributed to the formation of the Mexican idiosyncracy, and in recent times, to stimulate national and international tourism with the traces of the great civilisations, their art and cultures.[17]

The anthropologists responsible for investigating the indigenous heritage focussed their attention, at first, mainly on the cultural relics of a glorious pre-Hispanic past. When dealing with contemporary Indians their preferred unit of study was the village or community which they considered to be an integrated functional system, a relatively closed, autonomous, and homogeneous universe. Therefore, the communities became the development programmes' main focus of attention. Authors such as Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and Ricardo Pozas Arciniega (1954), Robert Redfield (1947; 1956) or George Foster (1962; 1965) suggested that each community was characterised by a specific culture with the main function being to preserve the *status quo* (traditions, homogeneity, etc.). This view was already being criticised by scholars such as Eric Wolf (1957) or Sidney Mintz (1956) in the 1950s. They proceeded from a historical perspective and drew attention to the relationship between the rural communities and the dominant society surrounding them. The villages' internal structures were interpreted as resulting from the interaction between both spheres in the context of unequal power relations. Tendencies towards the levelling of unequal wealth within the communities were regarded as mechanisms for defence against colonial and post-colonial oppression. Later, wealth and power differences within the communities

17 *Discurso a los alumnos de la Escuela de Agricultura, generación 1964-1969, de la Universidad de Guadalajara*, Jalisco, 10 August 1969, Cárdenas (1972: 179).

became an object of study (e.g., Goldkind 1965). In addition, the relationship between villages and the state, the communities' integration into macroeconomic processes, and the consequences of development programmes were addressed. Studies stressed the diversity of economic strategies (retail trade, transport, commodity production, wage labour, migration). Marxist approaches began to play an important role in the 1960s. The study of the cultural dimension of rural producers, including a supposed indigenous way of life (folkways), became less and less important. While *campesino* replaced Indian (*indio* or *indígena*) as the common term to refer to the rural population in Spanish, terminology became more complex in English. It differed according to the authors' theoretical orientation and the focus of investigation. In addition to the older concept of "peasant" some talked about marginalised "smallholders"[18] (Netting 1993) others used "simple commodity producers" (Friedman 1978), "peasant-workers" or "semi-proletarians" (De Janvry 1981), "peasant-artisans" (Cook & Binford 1990) or, more recently, considered the rural population mainly as migratory "post-peasants" (Kearney 1996).

The abandonment of the term Indian by anthropology and rural sociology was reflected in government programmes, which increasingly aimed at integrating the indigenous population into peasant organisations. Neither the official development programmes nor the government's Indian policies fostered the spread of an overarching ethnic consciousness among the rural speakers of indigenous languages.

In spite of the failure to organise the indigenous population "from above", the expansion of bilingual education and of the state bureaucracy since the 1960s has permitted a growing number of peasant offspring to distance themselves from their humble background and gain upward social mobility to a certain extent. Public policies thus have, unintentionally, contributed to an increasing politicisation of people of indigenous roots. While the number of indigenous teachers alone rose between 1970 and 2000 from 3,400 to 49,000,[19] job opportunities did not increase on a similar scale. In addition, many of the better-trained Indians shared the experience of being discriminated against for their rural background, their skin colour or their proficiency in indigenous languages in spite of their education and cultural adaptation. Thus, social mobility remained limited for many and such limitation was frequently interpreted as the result of exclusion by national society (Gabbert 1992: 42-43).[20] Consequently,

18 The usages of this term are discussed in Bryceson (2000: 19-28).

19 Data are from Münzel (1984: 79) and Gobierno Federal (2002: 55).

20 Erwin Frank (1992: 53-55) found similar unintended consequences of indigenist policies in Ecuador. For additional factors fostering the emergence of ethnic consciousness and discourse among indigenous people, see Gabbert (2007b: 151-168).

specific indigenous claims began to be voiced, mainly by young intellectuals. Educated and acculturated Indians began to criticise the INI and to demand a stronger participation in the design and implementation of indigenist policies.[21]

4. From "participatory indigenism" to indigenous autonomy

Public Indian policies got a fresh drive and a new orientation during the presidency of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976). He tried to regain the confidence of the (indigenous) rural population and the indigenous elite, which had been lost during the political crisis of 1968 and the wave of protest movements in the countryside that followed. The official Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* – PRI) yielded to demands for bilingual education in the 1970s. The official programme of indigenism was forced to abandon ideas of "planned acculturation" and "regional integration" of indigenous refuge areas and to develop the concept of "participatory indigenism" instead. This was to be not just a policy *for* the Indians, as had been the case before, but now also *by* the Indians, who should participate in the design of the new strategies and programmes, at least according to official announcements. The issue of indigenous organisations became relevant again in this context.

These internal developments were complemented by a new political approach in international institutions (such as the World Bank) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the 1980s. Instead of being conceptualised as part of the problems affecting the rural poor in general, indigenous issues were now seen as specific. Social and economic aspects again became intimately related to culture. Thus, the International Labour Organization (ILO) passed convention 169 on 27 June 1989 to strengthen the rights of "indigenous peoples". Such rights were recognised at the highest international level by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted on 13 September 2007. In addition, international donors issued aid programmes directed exclusively at indigenous people. The UN, for example, announced in 1997 that it was providing ten million US dollars for productive projects on the Yucatan peninsula. The money was dedicated to activities that helped to preserve the indigenous culture in "Maya communities" (*Diario de Yucatán*, 15.02.1997). Thus, it became advantageous for many peasants to voice their demands in ethnic terms in an indigenous organisation instead of participating in a peasant league.

International organisations such as the UN and the World Bank began to pressure national governments to recognise the cultural specifity of indigenous populations and to improve their economic, social and legal situations. In addition to the changed

21 Such critique came, for example, from the *Asociación Mexicana de Profesionistas e Intelectuales Indígenas* – AMPII, founded in 1968.

international climate, the growing influence of social movements induced governments in many Latin American countries to earnestly consider the demands of indigenous populations. The National Commission for Justice for the Indigenous Peoples (*Comisión Nacional de Justicia para los Pueblos Indígenas*) was established in Mexico in 1989; it presented the President with a proposal for constitutional reform. This included nothing less than the redefinition of the Mexican nation, which should from now on rest not merely on a supposedly homogeneous mestizo population. Instead, Mexico was conceived of as a multi-ethnic society. This multi-ethnic character of the nation was identified as not merely transitory – a stage on the way to homogeneity due to deficient integration and assimilation – but a firm element of the nation to be protected and supported (Díaz-Polanco 1990). In contrast to former times, many government programmes now support the expression of cultural distinctiveness, creating previously unknown job opportunities, especially for educated Indians. Numerous institutions, such as communal museums, have emerged that cherish the indigenous heritage and culture.

Indigenous political mobilisation and organisation were strengthened by crucial events such as the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing in America, in 1992. Many Latin American governments planned to celebrate this event together with the most important former colonial powers by organising huge jubilees. Many indigenous peoples considered this an insupportable provocation remembering the fatal consequences of the "discovery" and the subsequent colonialisation. Common resistance to the jubilee led to the emergence of numerous new organisations and to a hitherto unknown linking-up among new and old initiatives on interregional and international levels. The 1994 uprising of the so-called Neo-Zapatistas in the state of Chiapas was another major event that drew the attention of the national and international public to the problems indigenous populations are facing. This attention prevented the uprising from being violently crushed by the government (Gabbert 1997; 2004b). The government quickly adopted measures to prevent the suspected outbreak of Indian rebellions in other parts of the country. A National Survey on Indigenous Rights and Participation was initiated in 1996. Community delegates were invited to discuss the problems and demands of the indigenous population, within a government-controlled framework. Thus, suggestions for the necessary political reforms were to be obtained. In contrast to the 1980s, these meetings were well attended by community delegates, who assumed that they could benefit from the government's need to regain the legitimacy that had been jeopardised by the Chiapas rebellion. *Ejidatarios* and community

delegates now willingly adopted what had become the official government discourse and presented themselves as "Indians".[22]

In contrast to former times, what is needed to attain social mobility today is not necessarily complete assimilation to the dominant non-Indian society. In fact, the knowledge of indigenous languages and traditions has become important cultural capital for many and has therefore gained in attractiveness even for the younger generations. This has contributed to a new self-confidence and increasing interest in defining oneself as a member of a larger ethnic community (corresponding in Mexico to the language groups, such as Yucatec Maya, Tzotzil, Nahuatl, etc.). Consequently, official institutions have noted an increase in the number of indigenous groups as well as in their membership.

To effectively raise legitimate demands for a decent life it is often necessary to use the stereotypes held by one's opponent: thus, indigenous leaders don supposedly traditional costumes for talks with government or media representatives. In tourism, too, which provides opportunities for work and income (e.g., in the service sector or in arts and crafts) efforts are made to meet the customers' expectations concerning an authentic and exotic indigenous culture. Many costumes originating in the colonial period are now considered typically Indian. Either they were part of the colonial dress code or their carriers were inspired by uniforms, costumes and the imported goods of the colonists. The creative use of these elements, in addition to others inspired by archaeological findings, has led to new forms of cultural expression. The same goes for the various types of crafts and dances, which are often not precolonial relics, but instead have been enriched by constant adjustment to the communities' needs. The longing for the pure, authentic expressions of indigenous tradition rests on an illusion, since it naively assumes indigenous societies to be static.

5. Conclusion

Colonial law defined "Indian" (*indio* or *indígena*) in the so-called caste-system (*sistema de castas*) as a separate estate with specific rights and duties. After independence such "racial" or ethnic distinctions were officially abolished since all citizens were to be equal before the law.[23] In fact, however, the Mexican elite justified the exploitation of the rural poor and the alienation of community lands, alluding to their lower status as

22 The given topics at one of these meetings in the state of Campeche were the following: manners and customs in the legal and political community organisation, indigenous culture, participation and representation of indigenous peoples, customary law and jurisdiction, development and welfare, indigenous land and cultural property (field notes from the Chenes region, Campeche, Mexico, 14 March 1996).

23 See, for example, Gabbert (2004a: 60-64), for exceptions from this principle in Yucatan.

members of an inferior indigenous "race". After the Mexican Revolution the official discourse privileged *campesino* when referring to the rural population, and this term also became the common self-reference. *Indigena* or *indio* were mainly used by others, especially by indigenist institutions and many anthropologists. A new trend can be recognised in recent years. While *indígena* is increasingly accepted as a self-reference even at the grassroots level in communities, the term *campesino* is losing importance. This development reflects changes in the economic and social situation of many indigenous people. Agriculture has lost much of its importance as a source of income and subsistence while more and more people have left their communities, temporarily or permanently, to work and live in Mexico's cities or abroad.

The understandable desire to free themselves from the stigma of the "Indian" and to rise in the social status system has existed among the rural poor since the colonial period. Even if the classification of individuals was not always clear due to the considerable social and cultural amalgamation processes, the separation between non-Indians and Indians, between colonisers and colonised, remained at the core of the status order even after independence. Such separation was reflected in the relationship of rural communities with national development agencies. Under the custody of the state special education programmes were implemented that aimed at the cultural assimilation of the indigenous population and their integration into the capitalist economy. However, the majority population has been frequently unwilling to integrate and assimilate people of indigenous background.

State intervention in the agricultural sector varied in intensity during different phases. It occurred mainly at three levels: the control of the means of production (including access to land); the investment of public funds and the organisation of producers with the help of the official peasant organisations; and government authorities and local intermediaries. Agrarian reform and rural "development" thus implied the extension of the state's influence in the villages. The current rise of an ethnic discourse and consciousness in the rural communities is also a reaction to the withdrawal of the state from many activities related to agricultural production, commercialisation, and social services following the adoption of the neoliberal economic theory in recent decades. The gap that resulted has often been filled by NGOs and international donors whose work has contributed to the spread of an ethnic, indianist discourse among the rural population.

The emergence of an ethnic political discourse, especially evident in the debate about autonomy rights that has grown in importance since the 1990s, has permitted the strategic alliance between distinct social groups among the indigenous population – between rural grassroots and the educated indigenous elite. On the one hand, the discourse includes demands for material resources – such as land, financial aid,

and social services – that reflect the interests of the rural base; on the other, when the discourse specifically addresses autonomy it expresses the claim of educated people of indigenous background to political and administrative positions which correspond to their training and qualifications.

The growing importance of indigenous organisations in recent years has led to a profound revision of colonialist discourse. While "Indian" and "indigenous" had been used pejoratively before, they have become symbols of cultural specificity and a rich cultural heritage. In contrast to former times, when "Indian" was employed mostly by non-Indians to refer to the rural population, the term is now increasingly adopted as a self-reference even at grassroots level. These developments should not be dismissed merely as expressions of strategic opportunism, the flexible use of fashionable discourses or the manipulation of the rural (and urban) poor with indigenous background. They reflect, rather, emerging self-confidence, the conviction that one is someone special in the positive sense. The renaissance of the indigenous has been fostered by a changed national and international political climate. But it is also part of an independent struggle for equal and specific rights, the recognition of cultural difference and for economic prosperity. This "re-Indianization" of growing sectors of the rural (and increasingly also the urban migrant) population has triggered a renewed interest within anthropology for topics such as identity, ethnicity and cultural difference. The Indian who was replaced by the *campesino* after the Revolution is back on the scene.

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